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ABSTRACT

An evaluation of the Bachelor of Elected Studies program at the University of Minnesota fostered an interest in knowing more about the extent to which similar programs existed in other colleges. A survey of 129 schools dealt with the type of degree offered, the flexibility in design of the major, the extent of faculty review, and the name of the degree conferred. (JMF)

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College of Liberal Arts
University of Minnesota
January 1976

Miriam Kragness
Coordinator
BES Program

STUDENT-DESIGNED DEGREE PROGRAMS

IN U. S. COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

The present review of the Bachelor of Elected Studies program in the College of Liberal Arts has fostered an interest in knowing more about the extent to which similar programs may exist in other colleges in the United States. It is felt that an evaluation of the BES degree will be well-served by obtaining some information about how other schools have approached similar educational goals.

A brief questionnaire and cover letter were mailed during the spring months of 1975 to schools offering degrees in liberal arts and enrolling at least 5000 students. Copies are included in the Appendix. The study was shared by the BES office at the University of Minnesota and the Bachelor of General Studies Information Center at the University of Iowa. The BES office was responsible for surveying Big Ten schools, schools in all north central and south central states, and schools in selected western states. The BGS Center surveyed remaining western states, including Hawaii and Alaska, and all states in the eastern third of the United States.

Funding for the BGS Center ran out before their portion of the survey was completed. Results which were obtained are included in Part II of this report. The Minnesota portion of the study was completed, and Part I includes the results obtained from 129 of 150 schools surveyed.

PART I

Schools selected for the Minnesota portion of the survey numbered 150. Letters and questionnaire were addressed to Administrative officer, Liberal Arts College, [name of university] or Administrative officer, [name of college]. In some cases, the letter was forwarded to another unit of a university; and thus results reflect program development in colleges other than the liberal arts college, for these cases. Six weeks after the initial letter was mailed, a follow-up letter, together with copies of the original letter and questionnaire, were sent.

Eighty-six percent of the schools surveyed responded after one or both inquiries (N = 129). Of these, 83 schools reported the availability or provisional availability of a student-designed degree program (64% of respondents). These 83 schools, offering 99 programs in all, provided the following results.

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RESULTS

College offering program (N = 89)

College		Two programs available
Liberal arts	N = 57	N = 8
University wide	N = 24	N = 2

Includes University College, College of General Studies, institutions organized as colleges only, and institutions where no collegiate unit was identified.

Other	N = 8	N = 0

Includes Continuing Education, Honors College, Graduate School, and Center for Experimental Studies

Six schools offered programs through both liberal arts and another unit of the university but no more than one program in a college.

Name of program and degree (N = 99)

Traditional degrees		Non-traditional degrees	
BA only	N = 16	Bachelor of General Studies	N = 18
BS only	2	Bachelor of University Studies	6
BA or BS as appropriate	28	Bachelor of Liberal Studies	3
BSEd	1	Bachelor of Individualized Studies	3
Any traditional degree at the university	1	Bachelor of Elective Studies	1
Associate of Science	1	Associate in Special Studies	1
MA, MS, PhD, MA-JD	2	Associate in Individualized Studies	1
No degree specified (generally an individualized major, traditional degree assumed)	14	Masters in Interdisciplinary Studies	1
	65	Total	34

Where only the name of a program was given, the name generally reflected either an individualized or cross-disciplinary character to the option.

Degree requirements (N = 93 bachelor's degree programs)

	Required and firm	Not required or flexible	No information
Freshman English	N = 61	N = 24	N = 8
Liberal arts distribution	49	34	10
Foreign language	7	53	33
Upper division credits	66	5	22

Two programs require distribution but not freshman English. All other programs requiring distribution also require freshman English.

Limits on credits per department or discipline (N = 99)

Minimum limit only	N = 25
Maximum limit only	11
Both minimum and maximum limits applied	7
Program requires breadth	21
No limits of any kind	9
No information	33

Faculty supervision required (N = 99)

At admission		N = 75
During progress toward degree		35
By committee	N = 28	
By written contract	4	
By required seminar	1	
No supervision required		2
No information		13

In the two instances where no faculty supervision is required, some effort to displace responsibility is made: in one program the student must sign a disclaimer regarding responsibility for the outcome of his degree; in the other program, staff conduct an audit during the junior year and invite students with an apparent problem to consult with staff.

Enrollment (N = 99)

Less than 3% of parent college	N = 44
At least 3% of parent college	11
No enrollment: just approved or pending approval	19
No information	25

Evidence of experimentation (N = 99)

Status experimental	N = 7
Status pending approval	9
Status permanent (incl. 10 just approved)	83
Research completed or in progress	14

Type of program (N = 99)

Individually designed major with liberal arts requirements	N = 37
Individually designed, cross-college program with liberal arts requirements	22
Liberal arts program with no traditional liberal arts requirements	17
Cross-college program with no traditional liberal arts requirements	11
University Scholars program: no requirements, faculty sponsor	5
Individually designed associate degree	3
Individually designed graduate degree	3
Other	3

Specific features of some programs

1. Most programs originated during the early 1970's. The three oldest programs began in 1932, 1935, and 1950.

2. Student accountability is insured in several ways, in addition to grades and rate of completion: thesis or senior project (six programs), required courses (three), degree candidate's statement (two), and final exam (two). One program requires degree clearance from a committee serving as the student's advisers.

3. In some cases a major is posted on the transcript. Two programs allow a conventional major; seven programs post a major title of the student's invention.

4. Non-liberal arts credits are permitted on five alternative liberal arts degrees. Mode (4 of 5) = 30 quarter credits.

5. Credit for experience and/or vocational training is permitted on four degrees.

6. Three programs volunteered that the degree is available with honors.

7. The advisory committee, where one exists, is typically appointed; but in several instances students are invited to select one or more of the members. In one case the committee is entirely of the student's choosing and includes persons who are not faculty.

8. Other aspects unique to only one program: research method as an alternative to a foreign language requirement; students invited to design own courses to be offered to fellow students; program available on interim basis for students undecided about whether to finish alternative degree.

9. Research reports are available for six programs. As reported earlier, research was undertaken in only 14 of the programs reported.

PART II

Schools selected for the Iowa portion of the survey numbered 160 and included the University of Iowa. A letter similar to the one included in the appendix and the same questionnaire were sent to the dean of the liberal arts college at each institution. Responses were received from 42 (26%) of the schools surveyed and no follow-up was employed. Of the 42 schools responding, 30 (71% of respondents) reported offering a student-designed degree option. The results from these 30 schools, offering 31 degrees, are reported below.

RESULTS

College offering program (N = 30)

College		Two programs available
Liberal arts	N = 18	N = 0
University wide	10	1
Other	2	0

Both of these schools serve adults through continuing education.

Name of program and degree (N = 31)

Traditional degrees		Non-traditional degree	
BA only	N = 11	Bachelor of General Studies	N = 3
BA or BS as appropriate	11	Bachelor of Individualized Studies	1
AB/BSE	1	Bachelor of Elective Studies	1
MS, MA	1	Bachelor of Philosophy	1
No degree specified (individualized major)	1		6
	25		

Degree requirements (N = 30 bachelor's degree programs)

	Required and firm	Not required or flexible	No information
Freshman English	N = 18	N = 7	N = 5
Liberal arts distribution	19	7	4
Foreign language	4	9	19
Upper division credits	17	1	12

Limits on credits per department or discipline (N = 31)

Minimum limit only	N = 10
Maximum limit only	2
Program requires breadth	3
No limits of any kind	6
No information	9

Faculty supervision required (N = 31)

At admission		N = 25
During progress toward degree		17
By committee	N = 11	
No supervision required		2
No information		4

Enrollment (N = 31)

Less than 3% of parent college	N = 12
At least 3% of parent college	5
No enrollment: just approved	1
No information	12

Evidence of experimentation (N = 31)

Status experimental	N = 0
Status pending approval	1
Status permanent (incl. 1 just approved)	30
Research completed or in progress	1

Type of program (N = 31)

Individually designed major with liberal arts requirements	N = 17
Individually designed, cross-college program with liberal arts requirements	N = 1
Liberal arts program with no traditional liberal arts requirements	4
Cross-college program with no traditional liberal arts requirements	4
Individually designed associate degree	1
Individually designed graduate degree	1
Other	3

Specific features

1. One program, listed under "other" above, offers no alternatives to the general requirements for a BA degree; but students are invited to develop alternative classroom methods for studying required material.

2. Six programs require some measure of student achievement in addition to grades: a required course or seminar, a written report or senior project, or a final exam.

3. The following allowances are reported by one or two degree programs each: departmental major, non-liberal arts credits permitted on a liberal arts degree, credit for experience, and college honors.

4. No research reports are available from the programs reviewed here.

DISCUSSION

Comparison of results

Minnesota and Iowa portions of this survey have been reported separately because of the number of schools not represented in the Iowa survey. It remains interesting to observe, however, whether trends seen in central and western parts of the U.S. are duplicated in the eastern and western sections surveyed by Iowa.

More similarities than differences are observed between the two groups of data. Similarities are seen in the proportion of liberal arts programs to university-wide programs represented in the survey. Two-thirds of the Minnesota sample and three-fourths of the Iowa sample offered traditional degrees (BA and BS). Requirements in freshman English, liberal arts distribution, and advanced courses were present in over half the programs sampled in each portion. The largest difference between schools was for the proportion requiring advanced course work: 70% for the Minnesota sample and 56% for the Iowa sample. These differences may be due to sampling error.

Faculty review of applicants was required by most programs in each sample. The Iowa sample showed more programs requiring faculty supervision of students in progress toward a degree (55% vs. 34% for the Minnesota sample). Committee review was employed in about one-third of the programs in each portion of the survey.

Enrollment was small across the survey, with relatively few programs in either portion showing more than three percent enrollment from the parent college population. A large proportion of the programs from both samples had permanent status in their collegiate units.

The samples were nearly the same when compared for type of program. The first and second descriptors under Type of Program (see Results, pages four and seven) indicate that nearly 60% of both samples offered a student-designed option which included traditional liberal arts requirements. Descriptors three and four indicate that a little over one-fourth offer degrees without such requirements. The latter figure is larger if the rest of the descriptors are included.

To what extent have other schools developed programs similar to BES, and what other options do they offer students who wish to design their own degree programs?

In the total survey of 310 schools meeting the criteria (minimum 5000 enrolled students, liberal arts degree(s)), 171 schools responded (55%). From this response,

113 schools were discovered to have a degree option which permitted students to design a significant part of their degree work--36% of the schools surveyed, 55% for the Minnesota sample. From the amount of similarity between results for both Iowa and Minnesota samples, one can estimate that half or more of the schools in the United States which meet the criteria for this survey offer the student-designed degree option.

The options vary across schools, with more of them offering flexibility in planning a major or interdisciplinary core. Fewer schools offered the student an option of designing his entire degree program--38%, based on descriptors three through six under Type of Program. The more specific nature of these options is expressed in this and other tables under Results.

A majority of programs required sophomore standing and average or above average grades for admission.

Where the purposes of other programs are comparable to those for BES, what alternative methods have been devised to accomplish them?

A list of schools with programs similar to BES is attached. Twenty-nine bachelor's programs and three master's programs were identified from the survey which offer students the option of designing a degree with a predominant focus on liberal arts. Most provide for the inclusion of some courses from professional schools or departments in a bachelor's program.

These options bear many different titles, and the list identifies them. Only eight of the 29 undergraduate programs awarded the traditional BA or BS degree.

In nearly all programs, the importance of faculty supervision was clear. All but the University of Michigan required students to justify their academic goals and/or accomplishments to one or more members of the faculty. The range of acceptable student proposals was broad for these programs generally. Several of them offered a course or seminar for degree candidates and required a formal statement or product of what the student accomplished.

In no programs were students required to complete a set of course requirements in freshman English or distribution areas. A few schools required, by state law, courses in American history or government.

Are there any observable trends in alternative education at the college level?

Many of the participants in this survey remarked about the recent and growing interest in a student-designed degree option. That there were 20 programs at the proposal or just-approved stage provides some measure of the currentness of the present trend. A number of respondents who offered no student-designed degree option expressed interest in the results of our survey and/or indicated the subject had been discussed at their school.

One of the oldest and most popular programs was the Bachelor of General Studies degree at the University of Nebraska in Omaha, begun in 1950 and awarding 14,000 degrees to date. This program was available to older adults, through the College of Continuing Studies, as were seven other programs in the survey.

That three programs each emerged at the associate and graduate degree levels is worth noting. The trend toward alternatives in college degree programs appears broad.

Three workshops have been held annually in the United States by a growing, informal association of schools offering individualized degrees.

Where empirical information has been obtained, can it shed additional light on the data gathered for the BES program?

Little empirical information has been gathered to date by programs surveyed. The University of Michigan, the Ohio University at Athens, and the University of Illinois at Chicago Circle have done a rather extensive empirical investigation. Some information is also available from the University of Iowa, Utah State University, and the University of Cincinnati. Reports received to date indicate that graduates of an alternative degree program fare at least as well as their classmates in traditional programs before and after graduation. The evidence essentially duplicates what research for the BES program has shown.

SUMMARY

Approximately half of a sample of colleges and universities enrolling over 5000 students in liberal arts programs offer students a significant opportunity to individualize their education. Most award a traditional degree, and most allow flexibility in the design of a major rather than in the liberal arts core of the degree.

A significant number allow considerable flexibility in the entire degree program, while generally maintaining a standard that requires advanced work and work of good quality. Almost all programs require faculty review at admission and/or during the student's progress toward completion of the degree.

Most programs have originated in the late 1960's and 1970's, and the sample includes student-designed degrees at the associate and graduate levels. Degrees vary and about one-third of them are called by a name other than Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of Science, with Bachelor of General Studies appearing most commonly in this group.

Research is sparse. Most programs have been evaluated subjectively, and most have been approved without a period of experimentation. A number of newer programs have utilized information supplied by the University of Michigan and the Ohio University as BGS prototypes.

Because of the permanent status of the degree in most schools, the existence of student-designed programs appears firm. But where few students enroll, the option may come under further study. As a general trend, this means to an education is new, and it remains to be further tested before a conclusive evaluation can be made.

APPENDIX

Includes: initial letter of inquiry

questionnaire

follow-up letter

list of programs similar to BES

list of schools with a student-designed degree program

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA
TWIN CITIES

College of Liberal Arts
Student Personnel Offices
Bachelor of Elected Studies
49 Johnston Hall
Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455

April 1, 1975

Dear colleague:

We are assembling information about student-designed degree programs in colleges and universities in the U.S. Our goal is to assess the extent to which such programs are available and to identify their essential features.

This effort is preparatory to evaluation of the Bachelor of Elected Studies Program in the College of Liberal Arts at this University. And knowing of no agency which has centralized this information at the present time, we are assembling the information with the expectation that other schools may want to share it.

Will you help by sending a brief summary and/or printed information about such a degree option as it exists in your school. You may want to use the enclosed questionnaire for your response.

Many thanks for your help in this project.

Sincerely yours,

Miriam Kragness, Coordinator
Bachelor of Elected Studies Program

Enclosure

Questionnaire

STUDENT-DESIGNED DEGREE PROGRAM

Description

Degree:_____ Status: ___ Experimental, pending review
___ Permanent

College (and University):_____

Degree requirements and allowances:_____

_____

_____

Enrollment

Number of students admitted per year:_____ Quota used?_____

Number of students enrolled per term:_____

Total term enrollment of unit from which students are drawn:_____

Number of graduates to date:_____

Measurement and Evaluation

	Yes	No	Instruments Used (type or name)
Student characteristics	___	___	_____
Academic outcomes	___	___	_____
Success of graduates	___	___	_____
Student evaluation	___	___	_____
Faculty/administrative evaluation	___	___	_____
Community evaluation	___	___	_____
Reports of evaluation available?	___	___	

Program director or research specialist:_____

Mailing address:_____

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA
TWIN CITIES

College of Liberal Arts
Student Personnel Offices
Bachelor of Elected Studies
49 Johnston Hall
Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455

April 10, 1975

Dear colleague:

I am following up a letter sent March 1, 1975 to your school. Since the inquiry was not specifically addressed, the appropriate person may not have received it.

The original letter (now dated April 1) and a questionnaire are enclosed. To accomplish a thorough investigation, we would like very much to include information from your school in our survey.

Cordially yours,

Miriam Kragness, Coordinator
Bachelor of Elected Studies Program

If, on receipt of this letter, you have already sent information, I thank you.

SCHOOLS WITH PROGRAMS SIMILAR TO BES:

University	Degree
St. Cloud State (Minnesota)	Bachelor of Elective Studies
Western Illinois University	BA/BS Kaskakia Program
SE Missouri State University	Bachelor of General Studies
Mankato State (Minnesota)	BS-Open Studies
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee	BAG (BA-General Curriculum Option)
North Dakota State University	Bachelor of University Studies
Oklahoma State University	Bachelor of University Studies
Youngstown State University (Ohio)	Individual Curriculum Program
University of Missouri at Columbia	Bachelor of General Studies
Bowling Green State University (Ohio)	Bachelor of Liberal Studies
University of Louisville	Bachelor of Liberal Studies
University of Louisville	BA in General Studies
Idaho State University	Bachelor of University Studies
Ohio University - Athens	Bachelor of General Studies
University of Cincinnati	Bachelor of General Studies
University of Kentucky	Bachelor of General Studies
Kent State University	Bachelor of General Studies
Central Michigan University	Bachelor of Individualized Studies
University of Illinois - Chicago	BA/BS - Student Designed Curriculum
Stephen F. Austin State University	BA for Select Students
Texas Technical University	Bachelor of General Studies
University of Michigan	Bachelor of General Studies
Thomas More College (Kentucky)	Bachelor of Elective Studies
New Mexico State University	Bachelor of Individualized Studies
Pace University (New York)	BA/BS - Open Curriculum Program
Syracuse University	BA in Selected Studies
University of Iowa	Bachelor of General Studies
Pennsylvania State University	Bachelor of Philosophy
University of South Carolina	Bachelor of General Studies

GRADUATE PROGRAMS

University of Montana	Masters in Interdisciplinary Studies
University of Denver, Grad School of International Studies	MA, PhD, MA/JD
California State University at Northridge	MA, MS - Special Major

SCHOOLS WITH STUDENT-DESIGNED DEGREE PROGRAMS

Individually designed major with liberal arts requirements

University of Chicago
Northwestern University
South Dakota State University
Northern Illinois University
Western Michigan University
Western Kentucky University
University of Illinois at Urbana
University of Oklahoma
East Kentucky University
University of Tennesee at Martin
St. Louis University
University of Wisconsin at Oshkosh
Northern Michigan University
Drake University
Wright State University (Ohio)
Vanderbilt University
Rooseveit University
Moorhead State (Minnesota)
Metropolitan State College (Denver)
Indiana University-Purdue University of Indianapolis
University of Massachusetts at Amherst
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Old Dominion University (Va.)
Princeton University
Rhode Island College
Brigham Young University
Central Washington State College
Central Missouri State University
University of Wyoming
University of Utah
University of Idaho
Ohio State University
Texas Christian University
Oregon State University
University of Kentucky at Lexington
Kent State University
University of Tennessee
Western Washington State College
University of Colorado
University of Michigan
Iowa State University
Boston College
Berkeley
California State At Long Beach
California State at Northridge
Carnegie Mellon (Pa)
University of Rochester (N.Y.)
SUNY - Buffalo
Townson State College (Md.)
University of Vermont

Individually designed, cross-college program with liberal arts requirements

Tulane University
University of Wisconsin at Stout
Western Michigan University
University of Northern Iowa
University of Toledo
University of Wisconsin at Whitewater
DePauw University
Southeastern Missouri State University
Morehead State (Ky.)
University of Wisconsin at Oshkosh
University of Wisconsin at Madison
Northern Michigan University
Drake University
Illinois State University
University of Washington
Iowa State University
University of Hartford
Wichita State University
Northeastern Louisiana University
Utah State University
University of Missouri at St. Louis
University of New Hampshire

Liberal arts program with no traditional liberal arts requirements

St. Cloud State (Minn.)
University of Detroit
University of Nebraska at Lincoln
Western Illinois University
Southeastern Missouri State University
Mankato State (Minn.)
University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee
North Dakota State University
Oklahoma State University
Youngstown State University
Bowling Green State University
University of Louisville
University of Illinois at Chicago Circle
Stephen F. Austin State University
University of Michigan
Thomas More College (Ky)
New Mexico State University
Pace University
Syracuse University
University of Missouri at Columbia

Schools with student-designed degree programs
continued

Cross-college program with no traditional liberal arts requirements

University of Nebraska at Omaha
Idaho State University
Oklahoma State University
University of Utah
University of Mississippi
Ohio University (Athens)
University of Cincinnati
Texas Technical University
Kent State University
Central Michigan University
University of Michigan
Fairleigh Dickinson University (N.J.)
University of Iowa
Pennsylvania State University
Syracuse University

University Scholars Program: no requirements, faculty sponsor

Tulane University
University of Oregon
Southern Methodist University
University of Tennessee
Case Western Reserve University

Individually designed associate degree

Ohio University
Northern Michigan University
Thomas More College (Ky)

Individually designed graduate degree

University of Montana
Metropolitan State College (Denver)
University of Denver
California State Univ. at Northridge

Other programs

Southwestern Missouri State University	-- individualized minor
Kearney State College (Nebraska)	-- competency based degree
Western Washington State College	-- planned program of cross-disciplinary studies
St. John's University (N.Y.)	-- degree requirements traditional, alternative classroom methods
Western Carolina University	-- insufficient information
West Georgia College	-- insufficient information